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What Is the Purpose of Prophecy According to the Bible?

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Prophecy, a divine gift, has played a significant role throughout the biblical narrative. The purpose of prophecy extends beyond mere foretelling of future events. It serves to edify, exhort, and comfort believers in their spiritual journey. In an age where many seek physical and material comfort, understanding the true biblical purpose of prophecy is crucial for spiritual growth and alignment with God's will. However, it is also important to recognize that some people predict the future through communication with malevolent entities or spirits and operate within the church, calling themselves prophets. Let us explore the benefits of prophecy as outlined in Scripture and how modern interpretations can sometimes diverge from this purpose.

Edification: Building Up the Church

The primary purpose of prophecy is spiritual edification. To edify means to build up or strengthen. In 1 Corinthians 14:3, Paul explains, "*But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort.*" Here, prophecy is described as a means to strengthen the spiritual foundation of believers, promoting spiritual maturity and understanding.
Paul further emphasizes this in Ephesians 4:12-13, stating that the gifts, including prophecy, are given "to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ." This spiritual edification ensures that believers are rooted in sound doctrine and capable of discerning God's will.

Exhortation: Encouraging Repentance and Holiness

Exhortation in prophecy serves to call believers to repentance and holy living. Prophetic exhortation encourages individuals to turn away from sin and align their lives with God's standards. Hebrews 3:13 advises, *"But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today,' so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."*
The prophetic call to repentance is exemplified throughout the Old Testament, where prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah urged Israel to return to God and forsake their sinful ways. In the New Testament, John the Baptist's prophetic ministry was centered on exhorting people to repent (Matthew 3:2). Prophecy, therefore, is a tool used by God to draw His people closer to Him, promoting spiritual purity and a deeper relationship with the Creator.

Comfort: Providing Spiritual Assurance

The comfort provided by prophecy is not about alleviating physical discomfort but rather offering spiritual assurance and hope. Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:18, "*Therefore encourage one another with these words,*" referring to the hope of Christ's return. The knowledge that Christ's Kingdom is near provides profound comfort to believers, reminding them that their ultimate hope and rest are found in God.
This spiritual comfort contrasts with the worldly perspective that often equates comfort with the absence of difficulties or the presence of material blessings. In John 16:33, Jesus reminds His followers, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* True prophetic comfort lies in the assurance of God's sovereignty and the promise of eternal life with Him.

The Divergence of Modern Prophecies

While the biblical purpose of prophecy is clear, modern interpretations and applications of prophecy often diverge from this purpose. In recent times, there has been a growing trend where prophecies focus more on material prosperity, personal success, and physical well-being rather than spiritual edification, exhortation to holiness, and spiritual comfort. Prophets and preachers often promise financial breakthroughs, health miracles, and personal success as central messages. While God certainly cares for our needs (Philippians 4:19), the overemphasis on material blessings can lead believers to prioritize worldly success over spiritual growth. 1 Timothy 6:10 warns, *"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs."* When prophecies focus excessively on material wealth, they can inadvertently foster a love for money and materialism, diverting attention from the true essence of Christian faith.

Similarly, some modern prophecies offer a false sense of comfort by suggesting that all personal difficulties will soon end. While God's comfort is real, it is primarily spiritual rather than physical. True comfort comes from knowing that Christ is with us and that His Kingdom is near. Romans 8:18 reassures us, *"I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us."* By focusing on the immediate resolution of earthly troubles, these prophecies can mislead believers into expecting a life free from hardship, contrary to the teachings of Jesus. He said, *"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world"* (John 16:33). The comfort we receive from prophecy should remind us of our eternal hope in Christ, not just temporary relief from life's challenges.

Modern prophecies can also sometimes fall short in exhorting believers to true repentance and holy living. Instead of calling people to turn from sin and seek God's holiness, they might focus on affirmations and positive declarations. While encouragement is important, it should not replace the call to repentance and spiritual transformation. Hebrews 12:14 urges, "Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord." Prophecies that neglect the call to holiness and repentance fail to fulfill their biblical mandate.

False Prophets and Malevolent Entities

The Bible warns about false prophets and the danger of being led astray by those who claim to have prophetic insights but are influenced by malevolent entities. In Matthew 7:15, Jesus cautions, *"Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves."* These individuals may present themselves as genuine prophets, but their messages can lead believers away from the truth. Today, more than ever, individuals who predict the future through communication with malevolent entities or spirits inundate the church, unafraid to call themselves prophets. 1 John 4:1 advises, *"Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world."* It is crucial for believers to discern and test the spirits behind prophecies to ensure they align with biblical teachings and the character of God.

Contextual Relevance for Today

Throughout history, people have loved divination to know their future, and this practice has now shifted to the church under a different name, as prophecy. In today's fast-paced and materialistic world, the biblical principles of prophecy remain ever relevant. Many are disillusioned by the transient nature of worldly success and comfort. The message of prophecy offers a counter-narrative, emphasizing eternal truths and spiritual well-being over temporal concerns. Believers are called to seek spiritual edification through sound teaching and prophetic insight, encouraging one another to live holy lives and finding comfort in the hope of Christ's return. This perspective not only aligns with biblical teaching but also provides a foundation for enduring faith in the midst of life's challenges.

Conclusion

The benefits of prophecy, as outlined in the Bible, are profound and far-reaching. Prophecy edifies by strengthening the church, exhorts by calling believers to repentance and holiness, and comforts by offering spiritual assurance. As Christians, embracing these aspects of prophecy can lead to a deeper, more resilient faith that is firmly anchored in the promises of God. By focusing on the spiritual purposes of prophecy, we can transcend the fleeting comforts of this world and find lasting hope and encouragement in the truths of Scripture. As Paul encourages in 1 Corinthians 14:1, *"Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy."* In short, it is essential to discern and prioritize prophecies that align with biblical teaching, focusing on spiritual growth and the eternal hope we have in Christ. This approach ensures that we remain steadfast in our faith, undistracted by the allure of materialism and the false comfort of a trouble-free life. Let us seek prophecies that build us up in faith, call us to holiness, and remind us of the eternal comfort we have in Christ.

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